

# The Cry of Jazz and the expressive politics of music and race: interview with Ed Bland

by Chuck Kleinhans

## About Bland's film *The Cry of Jazz* (1959)

The 1959 film, *The Cry of Jazz*, begins with the end of a meeting of the "Parkwood Jazz Club" as a racially mixed group of twenty somethings begin to leave a modest apartment. Chicagoans in 1959 would likely read this as a thinly veiled event in the University of Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood, at the time the city's best known integrated neighborhood for young single professionals and students. Chicago was one of the most residentially segregated Northern cities at the time, actually more segregated than many in the South.

Edward O. Bland directed the remarkable film, *The Cry of Jazz* (1959), a landmark work of African American independent filmmaking. A 34 minute-long exposition about the nature and status of jazz music and the situation of black Americans, the film uses dramatic dialogue, direct address argumentation, realist documentary illustration, an innovative music soundtrack, and essayistic construction to argue about the nature of U.S. jazz music as an expression of the situation of black Americans in the center of the Civil Rights era. Seeing jazz as both empowering and limiting, the film is an acute and even painful statement of its political, social, cultural, and artistic moment.

The film's frame starts with a post-meeting discussion at the "Parkwood Jazz Club" among a racially mixed group of members. When a young white guy offers the opinion that rock 'n' roll is jazz, he is schooled by several very articulate black fellows who give an elaborate explanation of both the formal musical qualities of jazz and an explanation of jazz as an African American cultural form. The film was controversial in its first screenings: denounced as "Negro chauvinism" and promoted as bearing a message whites needed to hear and understand. It was elected to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2010. The film experienced a new surge of interest following the revived reputation of musician Sun Ra whose group is seen and heard extensively illustrating the didactic points.

After making the film, Ed Bland has had a notable career in the commercial music industry as a recording executive. In his varied professional life he has also been a working performing musician, a composer of blues and rhythm and blues music, a music-track producer for educational films, an arranger and recording executive for dozens of notable music artists, a composer, arranger, and orchestrator for dramatic and documentary films, a jazz radio DJ, a concert impresario, and a teacher and mentor to young aspiring hip hop artists. He has also composed work in the field of "art music," that is, modern classical music.



Natalie (left) thanks Bruce (center) for inviting her to the event, and for explaining that rock and roll is jazz. Hearing this Alex (right) comes over to correct Bruce, precipitating the argument for the rest of the film.



As Alex begins his exposition on what jazz is and how it is an expression of the conditions of Negro life in America, we see various scenes of urban ghetto life, such as these young boys throwing rocks at 40 oz. beer bottles on a burning pile of rubbish.



The soundtrack shifts back and forth from jazz being played to Alex's didactic explanation of the relation of jazz to black life. This sequence cleverly cross cuts the rhythmic nature of girls playing jump rope with teen boys playing basketball outdoors. Agile moves mark both everyday actions with the musical soundtrack providing rhythm to the bodies in motion.



I was astonished when I first saw the film in the 1970s, and I wanted to find out more about it and its director. That took a long time, but I finally had a chance to interview Ed Bland in Los Angeles, April 2, 1998. This interview represents that encounter, augmented with a few facts from other sources. [1][\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Nina Cartier, a Ph.D. student in Screen Cultures, Northwestern University, did the initial transcription of the interview (and a terrific job!). I have edited it into a more concise and readable format (standard procedure for interviews). And I promised Bland the opportunity to review the interview before publication for any corrections of fact.

Because new information has come to light, and several later interviews have been published, I've added some explanatory and additional information here in footnotes, hoping to make this as efficient for the reader and as accurate and informative as possible especially for a younger and international audience who may not know all the passing references. [2] The film can be found often on YouTube, often posted by fans of jazz musician Sun Ra, who appears with his band, in this rarest of footage of Ra's early career. But I would encourage anyone to obtain the excellent DVD version of film for better viewing and audio. [3] Other interviews and writers have been especially interested in Bland's music career; in this interview I've concentrated on the influences on and meaning of his single film. But I've also come to see *The Cry of Jazz* and Bland's career as being profoundly connected to its times, the changes in music and African American culture in the post WW2 era. The film was made in Chicago, and since I grew up there and returned to teach there I think Bland spoke more familiarly about those aspects of it.

I intend to write a follow up article providing a close analysis of the film itself. In it I will get to elaborate some points, but it will be useful for today's readers to remember or know that the film appeared at a key phase in the Civil Rights Era. The film itself does not mention specific recent events in the struggle, but the audience at the time would have been acutely aware of what the film's narrator, Alex, describes as the "savagery of white Americans." While the U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 decision conventionally marks the start of the Civil Rights Era by ending legal school segregation, Americans witnessed national events on television, such as the 1956 attempt by a young black woman to enroll in the University of Alabama which resulted in whites rioting, and President Eisenhower's sending Federal Army and National Guard troops to Arkansas to hold back angry abusive whites and protect black students while Little Rock High School was integrated. In 1958 a black church was bombed during Sunday morning church in Birmingham, Alabama, killing four girls. These headline events and many smaller more local struggles were common knowledge at the first screenings in 1959.

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CK: First of all, another teacher at Northwestern, Zeinabu Davis, said to say hello. She met you once at [filmmaker] Julie Dash's house here in Los Angeles. She said that she remembered one long evening where you started talking about the relation of jazz and film, and she said it just kept going on and on and on, and she loved it and she remembers that as one of the best times she ever had in LA. [4]

Jazz musicians playing their instruments are shot in carefully framed shots with dramatic light. The close-ups also serve to hide the fact that the musicians were not recorded in sync sound, but serve to illustrate a separate jazz soundtrack. The first phase of Alex's explanation lays out the musicological basis of jazz, explaining formal elements such as harmony and rhythmic repetition as restraints, and melodic improvisation as freedom.



At several key moments in the film Natalie provides a foil for Alex by objecting to one of his statements. That then redirects the schooling. As Alex says that white America oppresses the Negro, Natalie objects that he's saying whites (like her) are "not human." This sets up Alex's next line of argument in a directly confrontational style. The film is remarkable in allowing both sides to strongly express their views heavily laden with emotion in the fictional drama sequences.



To start, can you tell me about how you grew up and how you got to the point of making *The Cry of Jazz*?

EB. I was born in Chicago, July 25, 1926. I lived there until World War II was on and I was drafted into the Navy. When I was a little boy, my father (Edward Bland) worked at the Post Office. But he was also a literary critic and active in literary groups. I would be forced to sit in some of his literary meetings and listen to people like Ralph Ellison or Richard Wright or Gwendolyn Brooks, and so on. [5] I hated it. I wanted to play baseball. (laughs) You know, I was thinking, "What's this guy makin' me do this for when I could be havin' some fun?" It was boring, you know. You're 7 or 8 years old, and this is boring shit.

I had grown out of a situation in my home where my father was a Marxist. I don't know if he ever belonged to the [Communist] Party or not, but there are so many ways in which that can be expressed, you know, like Socialism and the Socialist Party and Trotsky and all that other stuff. And my mother was deep into Voodoo. So here was I, right in the middle, (laughs)...in the middle of this mess.

Before I went in the Navy I had a couple of years of college because I got out of high school when I was 16. During my musical development, my mind started to expand. My father was an autodidact, and he had thousands of books around the house including, you know, (James Joyce's) *Ulysses* and I remember once he had me go get a book by Bertram Russell and I brought it to him, and he shows me Bertram Russell's picture and I say, "Oh, he's ugly." And my father being very stiff said, "It doesn't matter whether he's ugly. He's a great man. You understand that?" [EB replies] "Yes I understand that." (laughs) So all these books and influences were around. So then, I got into college, and I had a chance.

CK: But you were also involved in music.

EB: Well, put it this way, we were good. In those days, there was much more around for kids, young musicians, to do than there is now, paradoxically, and I was playing sax and clarinet in various bands around town. One of the places we would meet would be in Washington Park at the fieldhouse there. [6] You knew every musician from the neighborhood, and we had a little "big band." Well, one of the players who was in the Jay McShann Band, a saxophone player, was sitting next to me and we were jammin' and stuff and battlin' each other in solos and so it comes up, he says to me "I'm quittin' the band. Uh, if you want, I'll recommend you for my chair." And he says, "You'll be sitting next to a fella named Charlie Parker." [7] And, I knew about Charlie Parker. And so, I said "Well, I have to get permission from my mother." 'Cause my father was in the war. So she wouldn't give it.

CK: Well, you were pretty young.

EB: That, and plus she had the thing where she had to be able to say to people that my son is going to college. See. And so, anyway, I was caught in between that. I'm very happy I didn't go out on the road... Now! So, I went to school at Wilson Junior College. This was when Junior Colleges were good, and their music major was based on the two-year plan of the University of Chicago.

When Pearl Harbor occurred in 1941, I knew what I was going to go in



After his initial definition of jazz, Alex returns to the African American cultural nature of jazz. Interwoven with his exposition are illustrative shots that make their own connections through editing. In one sequence the editing cuts back and forth between a large religious service in a gospel church and a couple dancing to a juke box in the background, again rhythmic movement is seen in two very different environments: a dark club or bar setting and a bright congregation with several of the worshippers clapping hands and moved by the spirit to dance with the gospel music. Thus sacred and profane are linked as having a shared basis in black music.



Having established the musical and social/cultural nature of jazz, Alex goes on to explain the historical development of jazz,

the service. I was 15, and I was playing music. And I would meet all the sailors from the band up at [the US Navy training center] Great Lakes, and they said, "Be sure and get into the Navy band. You should have no trouble, you play so well." And so that was it. I went in the Navy in January of '45, and the War was over in August, and I spent a year, waiting, almost to the day to get discharged. I was stationed at Treasure Island [the major San Francisco Bay Area Naval Base].

You know, all I did was play the *Star Spangled Banner*, in the morning, and now and then we'd have some other duty, like play a dance. And that was it. And then things really became very rough after the war was over, because, you know, the country was celebrating. Consequently, we had duty all over. We had to be spiffy. You know all the admirals were coming through. We had to be neat as hell, things we didn't have to do before. Every button had to be buttoned. And we were marching up and down the streets of San Francisco all the time. (laughs) So, that was the rough time: after the war was over.

At that time, in terms of college, you started majoring in your Junior year, and I knew that music composition was what I wanted to do. But I didn't have the analytical tools that one needs to understand how a piece of music is put together. So, I was trying to read form and analysis books all the time. I'd go to the San Francisco Library all the time, but the books I found didn't make any sense to me. So I'd began to develop a fine interest in philosophy. Also I'd read all kinds of musical criticism, especially the leading composers' journal called *Modern Music*. I could see that the way in which writers criticized a piece of music was based on some type of philosophical assumptions. Those weren't explicit at all; but, consequently, I decided, that obviously, anything I write when I get down to composing, I'm going to have to defend in some way or another, so I may as well go further in philosophy also. So at least I'll know what the competing bases of various arguments are. And so, that is what made me go to the University of Chicago after the war.

Well, my father got killed in WWII. Gwendolyn Brooks dedicated her book of poems, *Annie Allen*, to him.[8] So, my father had gotten killed and we had a horrible family life. All of us. So I said well, maybe I'll stick around Chicago. 'Cause, I could have gone to Eastman [School of Music], I could have stayed out on the West Coast and gone up to Berkeley where Roger Sessions was. But I said you know I should give this family life one last chance. And so I did. And it didn't work: the family was just too dysfunctional, and it all dissipated, but that's one of the reasons I came back and stayed in Chicago. The other was, my very best friend was a mathematician who grew up in the same neighborhood, Eugene Titus. He was going to the University of Chicago, and we were like this (*motions with his hands*). And so I decided, well I'll stay around Chicago a bit more and see just what happens.

The main reason to go to University of Chicago was, that I knew if I had gone to a conservatory, yes I'd learn all the *craft*. At Northwestern too, I would learn all the *craft* I needed, but I wouldn't know *why*. I had to find out what was, why was music conceived of in the manner in which was, in terms of writing contemporary symphonic music. And so I figured, well, I know University of Chicago is not a good school in terms of making all the connections you need to make and learning all the performance skills and things like that, but at least I can ask these

accompanied by the Sun Ra group playing in successive styles: Dixieland, Swing, Be Bop, etc.



Blonde Faye, in contrast to blunt Natalie, repeatedly plays the role of reconciler, agreeing with Alex and urging him to elaborate his critique. Her body language repeatedly establishes her moves to get physically close to Alex, who responds with smiles. The others observe this behavior: the white guys and Natalie, negatively.

questions---they'll tolerate my questions. So I went there. And they tolerated my questions, uhm for a little bit...(laughs)...up to a point. But they hated me, you know. But I didn't give a damn about that. 'Cause I had to get my answers. And you know, eventually, I did get either the answers or I knew how to get them.

So then I transferred to the American Conservatory of Music, and the UC Music Department was very happy to see me go. I finished up the rest of my GI Bill at American Conservatory. [9] And a little bit later, I studied with a modernist composer, an atonal composer in the Chicago area named John Becker, who used to teach at Chicago Musical College. I studied privately with him. Well Becker was one of the early American modernists like Charles Ives. [10]

CK: That's a really rich background.

EB: Oh yeah, well it is a very rich background. It gets richer..(laughs) Ok. Then eventually, it got to the point where I had to think about making a living. I'd given up playing altogether because I figured I had to get as far away from anything having to do with the jazz language as possible, to make sure that I made as pure a statement as possible of myself. And I could always go back. But having anything like that around me might keep me from going further and also give me easy ways out. You know I wanted to be as pure about it as possible. So, eventually I had used up all my, Navy benefits and had to think about getting a job, and by that time I had a kid on the way. So I started getting back in touch with my jazz musician friends and stuff. And I said, well I can always write popular songs. Which I could still. I was deep into Stockhausen and Webern and all that type of stuff, still.

So then, comes another period of richness. I started hanging around Chess Records. [11] And this was two or three years before Elvis. [12] [1956] And so, what you'd see, and it struck me immediately as something strange was going on, 'cause you'd hit Roosevelt Road right at Michigan and you'd see the Illinois Central tracks, and you'd see hundreds of people who just arrived from the South, walking, with their belongings wrapped up in newspaper and they were headed to the West Side. [13] And blacks in Chicago who were more sophisticated—or so we should say the jazz lover types—were on the South Side.

So, some musician friends of mine introduced me to Chess Records. Chess wanted nothing but blues, so I had to remember how to write a blues, and then presented some Blues to Chess Records. And one of the owners looks at me and says, "We don't do business with people who have copyright on their music."

CK: (laughs) They wanted control!

EB: (laughs) And that was the beginning, when you begin to see what the plantation was, really. You know, they were very interesting guys. And when they started off, their main interest and love was jazz. But in order to stay in business they had to fulfill this market, as one of them said, "Look, we're not Mercury Records," 'cause you know, Mercury was downtown. [14] So they said, "but, we know if we make a Muddy Waters record we'll sell 40,000 copies." And then, as talent came up from the South, they had many, many people they could rely on. That, and using Gospel music. [15] And they had a captive audience, so to speak.

And so, we did not, you know, Chess Records and I didn't get along very well, 'cause I was very smart-assed at the time, and I was more interested in what was right, and so on and so forth. And it was obvious that one couldn't talk to any of the stars around there because they're making whatever they're making you know, and if you start telling them about how they can correct things, "well, *who are you?* (laughs) I'm makin' \$350 a week. You know, if it wasn't for Mr. Chess, I wouldn't be making that."

And right across the street from Chess was Vee-Jay. [16] Chess was in an automobile garage which they had refurbished into a recording studio. I remember one day sitting there and a disc jockey named McKee Fitzhugh called up—just dyin'. And Phil said, "*What?!*? White boys are buying our records at McKee Fitzhugh's record shop!" And they were pissing! [17]

I started thinking, uh-oh this could be a real structural change. Because you know, everything in the music business is just night and day, 90 days and the trend is over. What I started doing was getting *Billboard*, analyzing the top 100 records and seeing where they came from, and writing in that style, or a combination of those styles. And I ended up getting contracts with various publishers and stuff around town. Nothing ever with Chess Records, but I was fine. I liked being there just to watch the whole thing develop. Then Bo Diddley came along, a little later. And Bo Diddley got in, and you heard this stuff coming over and it sounded like sheer jungle stuff, you know. [18]

At that time, the covers were being made by the various singers who were like the Maguire sisters who were on the Arthur Godfrey Show. [19] I begin to see perhaps the blacks in this thing were avant-garde. I had to think of it in that way. Before, to me, the avant-garde was Stockhausen and Webern.

CK: Right.

EB: But at least I saw this phenomenon going on that might be somewhat interesting. And then, what was very evident from reading the trades back then was that these huge companies like, you know, Mercury, RCA, Columbia, Decca, London Records; it was about five or seven record companies that were pretty big at the time. They had all this power and clout and yet they couldn't control the market, you know. This was like what's happening now in terms of rap music. But there they were, and I said well this should be interesting to see just how this develops. And the answer to that, was after about two or three years of this new music not being under control, was Elvis. (And, Carl Perkins shoulda been the one, because he came out first with "Blue Suede Shoes" and but was the breaks.) The Chess Brothers were good friend with some of the records people. I think it was Sam Phillips, down in Memphis. [20] So, that's another item of richness yet, to see all this develop, and gauging this time, in terms of what's actually going on. It was another education.

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